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DEPT FOR DRL/IRF OLIVIA HILTON

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: BELARUS, PROTESTANTS CONSOLIDATE EFFORTS TO
PROMOTE CHANGE

REF: 06 MINSK 1174

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) During a recent meeting with Ambassador, several Belarusian Pentecostal pastors laid out their plans to encourage Christian churches' participation in political and social activities to promote change in Belarus. These pastors, who represented several small, yet committed and energetic religious communities, hope to organize Christians into a "united force" to stand up to GOB harassment. Although they concede that much work still needs to be done to achieve this goal, their approach represents a significant change from Protestant groups' previous practices of operating individually and avoiding all things political. End summary.

New Reformation Movement Seeks to Unite Christians

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador recently met with the several Pentecostal pastors, who, along with members of the Baptist and Charismatic Protestant religious denominations, are part of the "New Reformation Movement" in Belarus. The movement, which was founded in 2001, seeks to create unity among the Evangelical churches and denominations, to assist the Belarusian Protestant churches in social and political activities, and to influence society. The pastors told Ambassador that by instilling patriotism and a Biblical worldview into Belarusians, the leaders of the movement hope to encourage people to take personal responsibility for their lives and not rely on left-over communist tenets that the government will provide for them.

¶3. (SBU) The pastors were very optimistic about their ability to successfully cooperate with the other Protestant denominations to form a "united force" to influence and change society. While they admit that much work needs to be done to achieve this goal, the pastors were particularly encouraged by the election of New Life Church's pastor Slava Goncharenko as the representative of the Full Gospel Union, given his strong leadership skills and willingness to use peaceful means to promote change and stand up to the GOB (reftel).

Protestants Commit to Change Despite GOB Roadblocks

¶4. (C) The church members, who are mainly youth and young

families, have already taken actions to defend their rights. Pastor Gennadiy Kernozhitskiy estimated that Christians represented approximately 15 percent of the people in the October Square "tent city" demonstrations following the fraudulent 2006 presidential elections. He added that mainly Christians were responsible for providing and preparing most of the food for the tent city activists. Kernozhitskiy noted that many Christians who participated in the demonstrations were subsequently fired from their jobs, expelled from the universities, or even imprisoned.

15. (C) Kernozhitskiy recounted for Ambassador the problems that his church members were currently facing, including GOB efforts to hinder the opening of a Christian school. With home schooling forbidden except for medical reasons, Kernozhitskiy told Ambassador that Christian families are forced to send their children to public schools where they are pressured to join state youth groups and ridiculed or harassed due to their religious beliefs.

What's Next: A 12-Year Plan to Promote Change

16. (SBU) The pastors presented to Ambassador their 12-year plan to unite Belarusian Evangelical churches and bring about their vision for change. Future goals included the formation of an association of Christian journalists, the launch of a Christian political movement, and creation of a legal center to help Christians and churches defend their rights, including freedom of religion. The pastors reviewed for Ambassador past and current projects aimed at influencing and educating society, which include establishing a Christian Information Center, a bimonthly newspaper, and an informational website (www.belreform.org), and hosting

regular seminars, Christian cultural events, and youth camps.

Comment

17. (C) There has been a noticeable change in the position and approach of Protestant groups since the beginning of the 2006 presidential election campaign. While these groups in Belarus have always been committed and well-organized, they had previously refrained from using their (limited) influence to promote change in the country. However, an increasing number of Protestants are demonstrating their willingness to defend their religious and other freedoms. Moreover, their increased focus on strengthening cooperation and mutual understanding within their denominations, and even with other religious groups (septel), is a positive step towards strengthening the opposition against the regime.

Stewart